The Hard, Stony Path: the Personal Convictions of a Christian Librarian

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A HARD, STONY PATH:
THE PERSONAL CONVICTIONS OF A
CHRISTIAN LIBRARIAN

Of all the issues I have had to deal with as a librarian and as a Christian, intellectual freedom is probably the thorniest and most difficult. It is an issue that arouses much emotion, and there are no pat formulas to direct Christian librarians as to how they should respond to given situations.

I have struggled with this issue ever since library school. I certainly uphold the First Amendment, and as a member of the profession I feel I should support the Library Bill of Rights. But what do I do when the interpretation of those documents conflicts with my Christian beliefs and way of life? Must I live a dichotomous life, adhering to one set of standards in my professional life and to another in my private life? I do not believe Christ calls us to serve Him through divided lives. I believe He has called us to live full and abundant lives, and that it is possible to live an intact life made up of both temporal and spiritual responsibilities.

One of the responsibilities of a professional is to develop a personal code of professional practice. One must meld professional standards with personal convictions. No professional operates solely on the basis of her professional code. Because she is human, she is influenced by more personal concerns. On the other hand, if everyone performed her professional duties solely on the basis of personal desires and wishes, there would be chaos within the occupation.
To achieve cooperation, continuity, and efficiency in a profession, standards and practices, usually upheld by the professional association, must be agreed upon. By supporting those professional standards, the status of that profession and the competency of its members are assured. However, an association is made up of many individuals who all have different interests, dreams, convictions, and philosophies. These individuals must develop their own professional style for their daily work life, applying both professional standards and personal convictions.

One of the professional standards of librarianship is the Intellectual Freedom Manual. In the preface intellectual freedom is defined as follows:

In basic terms, intellectual freedom means the right of any person to hold any belief whatever on any subject, and to express such beliefs or ideas in whatever way the person believes appropriate. ...the right of unrestricted access to all information and ideas regardless of the medium of communication used.

Certainly this is a civil right, and as law-abiding citizens we should uphold this tenet of intellectual freedom. However, I would like to point out that this is not a right that the Lord recognizes on the part of man. He demands complete obedience to His will and service. He expects man to worship Him as the one true God, and not "to hold any belief whatever..." about him. Nor is man to express his worship of the Lord "in whatever way the person believes appropriate...", but in the manner which the Lord has prescribed in the scriptures.
However, it is not up to us Christians to force the Lord's will on others; we can only proclaim His message to men. It is the Lord's prerogative to work out a change in men's lives, for He says, "No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him."² Moreover, we are enjoined by Paul and Peter to obey our civil authorities as long as they do not encroach on our personal obedience to the Lord.³

I think it is possible for a Christian librarian to be guided in her professional duties by both professional standards and scriptural principles. She must conscientiously apply these to each situation, and where the professional standards conflict with scriptural principles she must follow the latter. For I believe we must not live as librarians who happen to be Christians, but as Christians who happen to be librarians. Our goal should always be to glorify the Lord. As it is stated in the catechism: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."⁴ The purpose of everything we do in our lives, whether in our occupations or at home, should be to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. All else fades away in the light of this reality. I think Harold Best expresses this much better than I have.

The narrowness of the Christian road is not the narrowness of doing one thing but the narrowness of doing many things for one reason: the glory of God and in the name of Jesus.⁵

We are not limited so much as to what we can or cannot do in our professions, but we are limited as to what our motive should be: to bring glory to God.
While there is clearly one motive by which Christian librarians should operate, I am afraid I cannot offer one formula to be applied to every situation concerning intellectual freedom. There is no one rule which can be held up to such questions as: should this controversial title be ordered, should this potentially troublesome title be restricted, should we yield to patrons' demands that offensive materials be withdrawn, etc. These questions constantly face librarians every day.

I am afraid that all too often American Christians display a predilection for pat answers to daily problems and crises, and when no quick and easy solutions are forthcoming they become passive and apathetic toward those problems. Witness the modern church's response to the poor, which ranges from the passive: "The poor are always with us," to the hostile: "They could get jobs if they really wanted to."

No one can decide for us where to draw the line. All too often we expect our Christian leaders to make our decisions for us. If the local Christian bookstore doesn't have a best-seller which deals with our current crisis, we are lost as to how to deal with life's situations. We shy away from the perspiration of spiritual struggle and accountability involved in seeking answers on our own through the scriptures. We want it spoon-fed to us. We prefer to be passive practitioners of the faith rather than active. To actively practice our faith, we must earnestly seek the Lord's glory and will in every situation, and not rely on pat answers. This is a hard, stony path and a costly way of life. We must count that cost in lack of comfort and ease, wealth of controversy and hostility, and in the resulting glory to the Lord.
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While I offer no easy solutions, I do think there are some practical steps we Christian librarians can take which will enable us to conscientiously practice our faith through our profession.

Selection

As a Christian librarian, I sometimes bend over backwards to avoid bias in selection. And such decisions are not easy; a work one Christian librarian would consider to be an obvious reject might be considered a desirable selection by another. As John Swan has pointed out, "The Library Bill of Rights does not provide guidance for the librarian as to how she can resolve theory and practice. It only sets forth the guiding principles."  

The Christian librarian must be very careful in selection, keeping in mind "the consequences to the First Amendment rights of the author and the patron." The librarian should seek for reasons to select and keep a book, rather than for reasons to reject a book. While some librarians of all persuasions feel more comfortable with not ordering a book than they do with actually removing a book from the collection, the former practice is still passive censorship.

We need not fear truth, because all truth is God's truth. But not everything man says is truth is in fact, true. However, the believer can have assurance that God is sovereign and His truth will always triumph. Therefore, the Christian librarian should not fear to select books that she strongly disagrees with. And not only can she rest in the assurance of God's ultimate sovereignty, she can also lay hold on the promise that the Lord will provide wisdom for those who seek it and utilize that wisdom in the selection process along with the traditional tools of selection.
There is one other thing the Christian librarian can do--she can select books with Christian viewpoints on crucial issues whenever possible. She has more knowledge and awareness of Christian publishing than her non-Christian colleagues, and can help fill in those embarrassing gaps in library collections which have lately been pointed out by Reverend Jerry Falwell and Cal Thomas of Moral Majority. The omission of evangelical and conservative books from collections has probably been more the result of ignorance rather than deliberate practice. As Will Manley has said:

"Probably the biggest fallacy in our library school training is that we should stand unwaveringly and solely by the *LJ-Booklist* standards of excellence. For more books are published than are reviewed there, and that's where Jerry Falwell, the New Right, and evangelical Christianity come into play. Their type of book and their type of publisher are not widely reviewed (although we are beginning to see more) in our standard sources."

As Christians and librarians we should certainly be more aware than our colleagues of those other reviewing sources and publishers. Therefore, we can supplement our selection of secular materials with Christian materials, and inform our colleagues of suitable reviewing sources and publishers. What we select should be of high quality, fact-based, well researched, etc. In short, they should meet the same criteria we apply to other books we select for our library collections.

**Be Available**

In his thought-provoking article, "Minimum Qualifications and Intellectual Freedom," John Swan states that the librarian should not be
"a passive instrument of information processing."\textsuperscript{11} He deprecates a strict interpretation of intellectual freedom which engenders the idea that the librarian should keep her opinions to herself.\textsuperscript{12}

Rather, he sees the librarian as an educator who is involved in an education process with her patrons. In this role, the librarian may share her knowledge, experience, and opinions, without imposing them or endangering anyone's personal independence of thought. Accordingly, Mr. Swan concludes that:

It is possible, therefore, to accept both the civil libertarian view that library material should never be suppressed on the grounds of personal disagreement and the belief that the librarian should be free to share his knowledge and judgment of the materials. Should he force his views on the patron? Of course not—but the librarian who shows a willingness and ability to share his knowledge is the librarian who gets asked to do so. The librarian is an educator, not a passive instrument of information processing. The better prepared and the more open the educating librarian is, the greater the contribution to intellectual freedom.\textsuperscript{13}

This can certainly be applied to the Christian librarian. Don't be afraid to share your convictions with those who show interest. We're not talking here about sharing the Four Spiritual Laws\textsuperscript{14} with every person who darkens the library doors. However, it is valid when someone seeks information on a particular topic to include anything your library has with a Christian viewpoint of that topic. If you are asked your opinion, share it. It can be done without brow-beating, and then you have opened up a dynamic relationship with your patron which should be desirable to all librarians.\textsuperscript{15}
Prayer

Pray for knowledge and wisdom. Keeping a close relationship with the Lord is the only way to achieve being a librarian who does not compromise her faith. Few situations involving intellectual freedom are always clear-cut, so we need divine assistance both for making decisions and for gaining strength to carry out those decisions.

Let Your Voice Be Heard

It is a terrible thing to remain silent. We are warned of the responsibilities of the watchman in the book of Ezekiel.¹⁶ We can write letters, review Christian books for standard journals, and speak candidly at professional meetings with our colleagues, not hiding our convictions. But if you do speak out, you must be prepared to....

Gird Up Your Loins

It is much easier to be a passive Christian and a passive librarian. But we do injustice to both our Lord and to our profession if we do not give our all and seek a more active role.

Making such choices involves much spiritual perspiration and effort. It is not comfortable and does not endear us to our non-Christian colleagues. It is to be hoped that they will respect us for the strength of our convictions, but if not we must carry on.

We need the support of our fellow Christians, whether in the profession or our local churches. Be candid with them and ask for prayer support. Also organizations like FOCLIS and Association of Christian Librarians can be invaluable in offering moral support.
Personally, I find reading periodicals such as *Christian Librarian*, *Today's Christian Woman*, and *Contemporary Christian* to be very helpful. Such periodicals which address practical means of applying our faith to daily situations are encouraging and edifying. But more important is daily Bible reading. Through consistent reading of the inspired word of the Lord, we can daily find the courage of our convictions and not waver in the face of adversity.

Just as the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world holds back the tide of evil, so the presence of Christians in every profession can help to hinder the power of godlessness. It is a heavy responsibility, but we need not fear the burden, for we know the Lordship of Christ and the Sovereignty of God will be triumphant. This hard and stony path which we travel will one day bring us face to face with the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ we endeavor to serve.
Notes


2. John 6:44


17. Matthew 5:13-16